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Educating through exemplars: alternative paths to virtue

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Abstract. This paper confronts Zagzebski's exemplarism with the intertwined debates over the conditions of exemplarity and the unity-disunity of the virtues, to show the advantages of a pluralistic exemplar-based approach to moral education (PEBAME). PEBAME is based on a *prima facie* disunitarist perspective in moral theory, which amounts to admitting both exemplarity in all respects and single-virtue exemplarity. First, we account for the advantages of PEBAME, and we show how two figures in recent Italian history (Giorgio Perlasca and Gino Bartali) satisfy Blum's definitions of 'moral hero' and 'moral saint' (1988). Then, we offer a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of heroes and saints with respect to character education, according to four criteria derived from PEBAME: admirability, virtuousness, transparency, and imitability. Finally, we conclude that both unitarist and disunitarist exemplars are fundamental to character education; this is because of the hero's superiority to the saint with respect to imitability, a fundamental feature of the exemplar for character education.

Keywords: exemplarism, character education, unity of the virtues, moral heroes, moral saints.

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Introduction

The human enterprises of self-improvement and education through virtue cultivation have large been underestimated among moral philosophers the last few decades (Russell, 2015: 17). The role of moral exemplars has been similarly neglected, despite the fact that pointing to models of different virtues seems to be a very effective way to remind ourselves of the kind of persons we wish to be.

This paper inquires into the role exemplars play in moral education by drawing insights from two different but intertwined debates: namely, the debate on the necessary conditions for moral exemplarity and the debate regarding the unity-disunity of the virtues. Two prominent models of exemplarity arise out of the former, i.e. 'the moral saint' and 'the moral hero'. On the other hand, the latter focuses on the (im)possibility of admitting that possessing one virtue requires having them all. Therefore, as will become clear in Section 2, the latter debate challenges the authenticity of heroes as moral exemplars, for they display only one virtue to an exceptional degree.

We defend a *prima facie* disunitarist perspective, which amounts to accepting the exemplarity of both saints and heroes, and we provide a pluralistic account of exemplar-based character education (PEBAME). Our aim is to show that such a pluralistic account is preferable to a more selective perspective, that is one that restricts the notion of moral exemplarity to either exemplarity in all respects or single-virtue exemplarity.

In Section 1 we lay the ground for our argument by recalling the core claims of exemplarism and explaining why this perspective is apt for character education. In Section 2, we analyze the two debates mentioned above and introduce PEBAME. Section 3 offers two paradigmatic exemplars, taken from Italian twentieth century history, and shows how they fulfill the requirements for being considered respectively as a ‘moral hero’ and a ‘moral saint’, by referring to Blum’s (1988) work. In Section 4, we analyze the effectiveness of moral heroes and moral saints for character education according to the criteria provided by PEBAME. In particular, we focus our attention on the educator-novice relationship to cast light on the strategies that the educator should adopt when presenting novices with exemplars. Finally, in the conclusion we face the typical unitarist objection and show how the account we provided accommodates it.

Why exemplarism?

In order to understand what ‘looking at exemplars’ means, we can refer to the recent work of Linda Zagzebski, who defends an exemplarist virtue theory. Exemplarism, as Zagzebski conceives it (2006, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015), is a non-standard foundationalist view, in that the foundation of the theory is not conceptual: roughly, the idea is that we pick moral exemplars by direct reference to exceptional individuals identified through the emotion of admiration (Zagzebski, 2013: 198-199)¹.

The benefits of adopting an exemplar-based approach to character education are the following². First, exemplarism restores exemplars as the key to individuating, classifying, and cultivating the virtues, whereas other moral theories ignore or downplay the role of exemplars. On the one hand, standard forms of virtue ethics have not paid that much attention to the role of exemplars. On the other, Kantian deontologists do not commit themselves to talking about exemplars, as they are not willing to concede that reasons for acting can be drawn from outside the rational agent, without falling into a heteronomous account of morality. Nevertheless, educating through exemplars has always played a fundamental role in the ordinary educational paths, where the educator refers to historical, mythical or current models in order to attract the novice’s interest.

These considerations help to explain the second relevant feature of exemplarism, that is the fact that it aims at practical and educational implications. What is most interesting about exemplars, as exemplarism conceives them, is their capacity for motivating us to become good: encountering a moral exemplar, in person or through narratives, elicits our admiration and can be of the utmost moral significance, capable of changing the course of our lives in significant ways. As Iris Murdoch would have said, morality is not primarily a matter of struggling in order to act well, but has to do above all with having a strong attachment towards the right people and being inspired by them³.

Thirdly, exemplarism provides a convincing phenomenology of admiration. Indeed, it grants both that we can be mistaken about the exemplars we naturally admire, and that we are in the position to revise our judgments upon reflection⁴. Therefore, the educational strategy suggested by exemplarism perfectly suits the actual practice of moral development, which is constituted by continuous attempts to emulate exemplars. Finally, exemplarism clarifies the role of emulation in character education⁵. We consider this particular feature of the exemplarist theory noteworthy, for the idea of emulating models is especially important for those who work in education. Admittedly, it is quite common to hear teachers say things like ‘be yourself, don’t copy anyone else!’, making emulation sound like poor behavior, typical of insecure people. By contrast, exemplarism points out that emulation, far from being a ‘bad habit’, is the standard behaviour we adopt towards

a person we admire. Thus, the capacity to assess whether or not we are emulating authentic exemplars does not depend on emulation itself; rather, it rests on our ability to identify them through admiration and to judge upon reflection that they are adequate objects of this emotion.

Exemplars, the unity of the virtues and the grounds of PEBAME

Who is a moral exemplar? Following Blum, we may gather the wide variety of moral exemplars into two main types, namely moral heroes and moral saints⁶. Heroes represent the model of single-virtue exemplarity, heroes display at least one virtue to an exceptional degree. Most interpreters consider single-virtue exemplars to be most appropriate to the sphere of courage (i.e., they are virtuous in situations where others feel fear or terror). No attention is apparently paid to the possibility of there being generous, humble – and so on – models of the single-virtue exemplarity. On the contrary, we take these cases as possible: thus, we admit that someone can be a moral exemplar not only for her outstanding courage, but also for her exceptional generosity, honesty, compassion or humility. On the other hand, saints represent the model of exemplarity without qualification, as they are supposed to possess all the virtues. Most interpreters acknowledge the exemplarity of both models – see, in particular, Blum (1988) and Urmson (1958) – while Adams (1984), McGinn (1992), and Wolf (1982) focus almost exclusively on moral saints, though this does not exclude in principle the exemplarity of other models, such as heroes. Finally, Zagzebski (*forthcoming*) endorses a threefold account of exemplars. In particular, she distinguishes among the hero, the saint and the sage, where the last category includes those who display wisdom at the utmost degree.

Combining Blum's terminology with the intertwined debate on the unity of the virtues, we define the moral hero as someone who displays: (a) a moral project, (b) morally worthy motivations rooted in her own system of motivation, (c) a willingness to face risk or danger, and (d) possession of (at least) one virtue at an exceptional level among those relevant to her moral project. On the other hand, the moral saint is required to display the first three features of the hero plus (d*) possession of all the virtues at an exceptional level.

Here we come to the point where the debate concerning the unity of the virtues crosses that of moral exemplarity. If a moral exemplar does not possess all the virtues, she cannot have any of them, as strong unitarists hold (see Blum, 1988: 51), yet she might still consistently be a moral hero, according to disunitarists. Simply speaking, unitarists follow Aristotle in claiming that in order to have a real virtue one needs to possess all of them, whereas disunitarists argue that one can possess a genuine virtue without displaying others. Among unitarists, we can number Irwin (1988), Annas (1993), Wolf (2007), and Russell (2009). By contrast, Foot (1978), Nagel (1979), Williams (1982), Walker (1993), Badhwar (1996) and McDowell (1998) are fundamentally disunitarists, since either they do not believe the virtues to be mutually compatible (what Badhwar calls Mutual Incompatibility of the Virtues, and Walker Conflict Assumption) or they claim that there is no need for a virtue to be accompanied by all others to be genuine (Mutual Independence of the Virtues, in Badhwar's words)⁷.

There appear to be compelling reasons in support of both positions. Unitarists typically hold that any single virtue needs to be accompanied by practical wisdom – the intellectual virtue responsible for shaping character in all its expressions – in order to be an acquired trait instead of merely a natural one. Disunitarists, on the other hand, often appeal to experience that shows that one can clearly be, for example, honest but fearful, or tactful but intemperate, and so on. More radically, disunitarists often claim that there are, at least occasionally, incompatibilities among virtues: it can be impossible, at times, to behave both frankly and tactfully, for example when telling the truth to someone will hurt them.

We are not primarily interested in settling the dispute in moral theory between the two competing accounts just sketched. Rather, we maintain that the disunitarist view allows us to defend a pluralistic account of character education, for it includes a greater number of exemplars than the unitarist one; this is because the former, unlike the latter, concedes that both moral heroes and moral saints are authentically virtuous. Therefore, we endorse a *prima facie* disunitarist perspective, as we do not commit ourselves to provide arguments in support of disunitarism as a moral theory, yet we accept its fundamental thesis about the legitimacy of both forms of moral exemplarity to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses for an exemplarist account of character education.

We have so far outlined the advantages offered by an exemplarist perspective on character education, identified two main kinds of moral exemplars, and assumed that the exemplarity of both is not under question.

Our next move is to combine an exemplar-based approach to moral education with the tradition of Aristotelian character education in which exemplarism itself is rooted, in order to develop a pluralistic exemplar-based account of moral education account (PEBAME). What does it mean to become morally good, that is, virtuous, in a standard virtue-ethicist perspective? Following the Aristotelian tradition (Sherman, 1997; Steutel and Carr, 1999) we take it not as being primarily concerned with grasping the right principles of conduct and applying them to the situation at hand. Rather, we view it as the ‘cultivation of a range of sensibilities to the particularities of moral engagement, involving crucial interplay between the cognitive and the affective’ (Steutel and Carr, 1999: 12). Also, in line with Aristotelianism, we have it as central that ‘[c]haracter is caught through role-modelling and emotional contagion’ much more than being learnt by studying lists of abstract values (Kristjánsson, 2015: 21). This latter remark grounds the central role exemplars play in our perspective, and paves the way for a more robust integration of ‘standard’ virtue ethics with exemplarism with regard to character education.

We argue that three claims central to PEBAME arise out of combining exemplarism with Aristotelian character education. 1. Acquisition of the *virtues* or their constituents is the aim of character education – i.e. priority is assigned to aretaic notions over deontic ones (Steutel and Carr, 1999: 7); 2. *Imitation* of exemplars is the main way of achieving these aims; 3. Imitation as a means of education requires the educator (a) to elicit the pupils’ *admiration* by presenting them with genuinely good and imitable models and (b) to foster their capacity for *reflection* upon *prima facie* admiration. We will now evaluate whether and how pointing to the two kinds of exemplars identified so far meets the following four criteria: virtuousness, admirability, imitability, and transparency, i.e., the property of being easily recognizable as genuinely virtuous and admirable.

At a first glance, the last criterion might seem questionable, as an exemplar’s trait might be virtuous, yet not immediately recognizable as such. In the remainder of the article it will become clear that we do not take transparency as a litmus test for moral exemplarity, nor do we take an easy recognition of the exemplar’s admirable traits as always valuable for the novice’s moral development. What we want to highlight, rather, is that the degree of transparency displayed by the exemplar affects the educational stance that the educator can adopt towards the novice. In some circumstances, an exemplar’s weak degree of transparency may foster the activation of the novice’s moral imagination⁸. Yet, other contexts require the educator to select more transparent exemplars in order to make it easier for the novice to grasp their moral excellence and start the admiration-imitation process. In conclusion, despite its context-dependency, transparency is an extremely interesting criterion that an exemplar-based account of character education must take into consideration.

In the following section, we introduce the exceptional figures of two Italian Holocaust rescuers, Gino Bartali and Giorgio Perlasca, and ask whether they satisfy Blum’s conditions for being, respectively, a moral hero and a moral saint. In Section 4, we analyze their stories according to the criteria just offered in order to show their

significance for PEBAME. In conclusion, we reconsider the soundness of our stance, namely endorsing *prima facie* a *weakly* disunitarist view in moral theory to evaluate its consequences at an educational level.

Two study cases: Giorgio Perlasca and Gino Bartali

Let us consider the moral hero case first. Giorgio Perlasca (1910-1992) was an Italian who worked as a meat merchant before signing up to fight for Italy's fascist regime in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1938), and for General Franco in the Spanish Civil War (1939). Thanks to the latter experience, he received safe conduct valid in all Spanish embassies around the world. This fact changed his life and that of thousands of people years later. When the Nazis forced Miklós Horthy to abdicate the regency of Hungary and started mass deportations in 1944, Perlasca was given shelter by the Spanish embassy in Budapest, where he started to work for the ambassador. When the ambassador left the country (so as not to legitimize puppet Hungarian government, Perlasca pretended to have been appointed by the Spanish government as the ambassador's deputy. His sham was so successful that he was able to rescue more than 5000 Jews who had been crammed in several Spanish buildings in Budapest. After the war, Perlasca went back to Italy where nobody believed his story until 1987, when a group of women he rescued found and visited him in Padua and reported his deeds⁹. Among many honours, he was recognized as Righteous Among the Nations in 1987.

Perlasca seems to fulfill all the requirements for being a moral hero. He, (a) no doubt displayed a moral project, namely rescuing as many people as possible from the Nazis' barbarity; this was (b) supported by morally worthy motivations, such as his deep desire to save lives threatened by racist dehumanization¹⁰. Furthermore, it should be evident from our short summary of Perlasca's story that (c) he had to face serious risk almost every day from November 1944, when he 'replaced' the Spanish ambassador, to 16 January 1945, when Soviets were almost encircling Budapest¹¹. Finally, (d) he displayed three virtues at a non-standard level: compassion, courage and humility.

Concerning courage, it seems sufficient to report an important episode, which occurred on 30 November 1944. Immediately after the Spanish ambassador had left Budapest, Perlasca saw that Hungarian police officers were evacuating the Spanish houses where the Jews were staying. Thinking quickly he stopped them by declaring that he had an official appointment letter from Spain that conferred authority to himself on the ambassador's behalf. The Spanish government never wrote this letter; hence, he knew that he only had a few hours to corrupt the chief of the Arrow Cross party, the Hungarian National Socialist party, and obtain official accreditation as the ambassador's deputy before the Hungarian police discovered the fraud. He exposed himself to the point where either his attempt would have succeeded or he would have been caught and punished severely – that is an expression of exceptional courage.

With respect to humility, setting aside several testimonies included in Deaglio's biography of Perlasca, we can turn to the touching description of his arrival in Budapest train station with his wife in 1989, where he was invited to receive the Star of Merit. Perlasca says that he leaned out the window to look at the station and, after he noticed the crowds waiting, he thought something very unusual was about to happen. He did not even imagine that all those people were there just to thank and welcome him. We can take this episode as showing exceptional humility.

Despite the excellence and the enormous impact of his deeds, his youthful support of Fascism – which he never openly disavowed, even after the end of WWII – and his voluntary participation in two questionable wars prevent us from considering him as a moral saint. Indeed, such standpoints and actions express a lack of practical wisdom,

since they show that he failed to recognize their inconsistency with the compassionate motivation that grounded his moral project¹².

Let us now consider the story of our moral saint, the Italian cyclist Gino Bartali, whose extraordinary story is not as well-known as that of other Holocaust rescuers. Gino Bartali was born in Florence in 1914, and was a champion road cyclist. He won the Giro d'Italia and the Tour de France several times, becoming a popular and much admired national sporting hero. He was also a devout Catholic, and close friend to the Archbishop of Florence, Elia Angelo Dalla Costa, who married Bartali and his wife Adriana. After the German occupation of Italy in September 1943, Dalla Costa together with Rabbi Nathan Cassuto, organized a network to rescue Jews. Bartali, who was a courier for the Resistance, came to play an important role in this network's operation: he took advantage of his celebrity as a cyclist to transfer forged documents from one place to another by hiding them in the handlebar and seat of his bicycle. Bartali went back and forth between Florence and Assisi, where forged documents were produced, at least 40 times in two years, covering a distance of approximately 370km each journey. When he was stopped and searched, he pretended to be training and specifically asked the guards not to touch his bicycle, claiming that the different parts were very carefully calibrated to achieve maximum speed.

After the war, Bartali seldom spoke of his underground work during the German occupation, not even to his wife and children. Hence, many of his courageous endeavors remain unknown. He only agreed to be interviewed by Sara Corcos, who worked for the CDEC (Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea) in Milan, when she told him she was related to the family of Rabbi Cassuto. However, he refused to have the interview recorded because he said he had been motivated by his conscience and did not want to have his activity documented. In 2013, Yad Vashem recognized Gino Bartali as Righteous Among the Nations¹³.

Being one of the greatest cyclists of his times and, more importantly, rescuing several Italian Jews to the risk of his own life are Bartali's most astonishing achievements. However, not only was Bartali a great sportsman and an exemplar of courage, selflessness, and humility. Besides that, we come to learn from several sources that he was also a morally exceptional man with regard to almost all aspects of his personal and public life. Two further episodes are worth telling which illuminate the kind of person Bartali was¹⁴. The first is a story of rivalry and friendship. For great part of his career, Bartali had to face one main opponent, Fausto Coppi. The rivalry between the two cyclists had always been intense, but they managed to remain respectful to each other during the races and friends outside of work. In 1940, Coppi was about to win the Giro d'Italia when, during a particularly hard stage, he felt exhausted, got off the bike and started crying, since stopping there would have meant losing the whole race. Bartali, who was a couple of metres ahead of him, realized what was happening. He turned his bike back and reached Coppi, ordering him to get up and finish the stage. Coppi did so and eventually won the Giro d'Italia. That is one of the reasons why, after a life-long rivalry, an elderly Coppi said Bartali had been his best friend ever. The second episode discloses Bartali's detachment from material goods. It concerns the very last moments of his life, when he explicitly asked to be buried with poor Carmelite clothes, according to a saying he was very fond of: 'the last dress has no pockets' (Polisportiva Gagliarda, 2010: 40).

To summarize, as well as being courageous, righteous, and humble, Bartali proved to be honest, loyal and devoted to those closest to him, faithful to God, and disdainful of material goods. see in him a person who seemed to possess as many virtues as a human being can, so fulfilling the requirements for being a moral saint.

How heroes and saints fit PEBAME

All we have said about Perlasca and Bartali lay the ground for evaluating whether moral heroes and moral saints fit the PEBAME account. The most clear-cut and

straightforward way to do so it is to inquire how they meet the four criteria introduced in **Exemplars, the unity of the virtues and the grounds of PEBAME**. The point of the analysis is not that of assessing which is the superior or more authentic form of moral exemplarity. Rather, we aim to clarify what criteria educators should care about the most when presenting stories of heroes or saints to moral learners.

Let us consider admirability first, since both heroes and saints fulfill this criterion by definition, that is by virtue of their being moral exemplars. Going back to our stories, the first way in which we can make sense of the exceptionality of Perlasca's and Bartali's deeds is their being worthy of admiration. Nonetheless, their stories allow us to highlight an important difference in admirability between heroes and saints. The former – unlike the latter – by definition also possess non-virtuous character traits. The possibility is therefore open that novices will admire these non-virtuous character traits. In the case of Perlasca, novices might be attracted, for instance, by his military allegiance to Fascism rather than by his courage and humility¹⁵. By contrast, there can be nothing in Bartali's story that they might improperly admire¹⁶. Thus, heroes only reach the minimum threshold for being considered admirable, whereas saints largely exceed it. This difference in admirability significantly affects the degree to which the transparency criterion is met, as we will soon argue. Since virtuousness also has an impact on transparency, it is reasonable to take the former into consideration before analyzing the latter.

From what we have argued so far, it should be evident that moral saints are superior to heroes with regard to one main aspect of virtuousness. Indeed, by definition the former are more virtuous than the latter, as they possess all the virtues and hence lack vices. This fact is important for character education because, as Kristjánsson points out, educating for an overall virtuous life is more valuable than merely cultivating or helping novices cultivate single virtues (see 2015: 17).

However, education always is a gradual process: hence, even though the educator's broad scope is that of helping the novice becoming fully virtuous, there may be situations in which she needs to support the novice's moral development by focusing her attention on a specific trait of character. From this point of view, presenting novices with a moral hero may be as beneficial as presenting them with a saint, for the educator can decide to adopt an alternative educational stance and direct them to virtue by stressing the hero's vices. There are at least two possible ways to do so and both still involve admiration followed by reflection. On the one hand, she can lead the young to see that a particular vice impeded the hero from living a more accomplished life either by directly pointing out the bad consequences arising from such a vice in the hero's story, or by asking them to evaluate whether anything bad arose for the hero on the basis of her vice¹⁷.

On the other hand, she might direct the novices' attention to those moral mistakes that heroes have been able to correct by themselves through time, which could have prevented them from becoming exemplars. In Perlasca's case, for example, the educator could point out that the very idea of pretending to be the official representative of the Spanish government in order to rescue thousands of Jews out of altruism would be inconceivable if Perlasca did not dismiss fascist ideals.

Educating the novice to virtue by working with vices demands both the novice's and the educator's time and effort. Yet, such an educational approach can be more fruitful than just educating through the saint's virtues because it helps to develop the novice's moral imagination, whose proper cultivation represents a fundamental educational task. Pointing to the hero's vices clearly shows, in a way that effectively nourishes imagination, how immoral behaviour degrades life. While the saint is superior to the hero regarding the criterion of virtuousness, the hero can nonetheless satisfy the virtuousness criterion if the educator succeeds in letting the novice understand the limits of the hero's virtue – that is, what prevented her from becoming a saint.

Now, let us clarify why the transparency criterion rests on the previous ones. It is helpful to think of it as a twofold criterion including both transparency to *error-preventing reflection* (EPR) and to *virtue-detecting reflection* (VDR).

EPR pertains to what the novices need to do with the educator’s support in order to make sure that they are not admiring the wrong traits of the exemplar. It seems that the more the novices are required to reflect on the exemplar’s traits the lower is the degree to which the exemplar satisfies the EPR sub-criterion. In this respect, it seems plain that the saint is superior to the hero in that she lacks any vicious traits that the novices can mistakenly admire, as we have shown for Bartali’s case. Thus, no particular caution or reflection is required of the novice or the educator when dealing with moral saints. In contrast, making sense of the hero’s vicious traits may often require long-term reflection under the guidance of the educator, as the analysis of Perlasca’s moral development demonstrates.

On the other hand, VDR pertains to the reflection needed for detecting the exemplar’s virtues. Here, the hero displays two main advantages: first, since heroes possess only a limited number of virtues, once the novice understands what makes them extraordinarily admirable, she can easily associate each of them with their specific virtues. Hence, it becomes easy for the educator to recall ‘this’ or ‘that’ hero’s deeds and to recommend a particular hero to imitate, depending on the circumstances. The second advantage concerns the educational value of identifying virtues via reflecting on vices. Only heroes – because of their moral imperfection – enable this educational practice, which, as already argued, helps the novices developing their moral imagination. Therefore, we can conclude that saints and heroes complement one another in the transparency criterion: saints fare better in error-preventing reflection, while heroes fare better in virtue-detecting reflection.

Finally, consider imitability. This is the most important educational benefit of reflecting on moral heroes. Indeed, they are models worthy of imitation for their virtues, but also close to our imperfect condition with their non-virtuous traits. They possess what Kristjánsson calls ‘mixed traits’ (2015: 14). In contrast, saints like Bartali might look too far away from our ordinary experience and hence appear to be less imitable. Indeed, as Susan Wolf rightly notices, moral sainthood is such that the saint’s ‘concern for others plays the role that is played in most of our lives by more selfish, or, at any rate, less morally worthy concerns’ (1982: 420).

Despite Wolf’s caution about the desirability of moral saintliness (see 1982: 419), this fact does not undermine the thesis that sainthood constitutes a model of moral perfection for which we should strive. Nonetheless, it should help clarifying why heroes do better than saints with respect to imitability. As a matter of fact, it is easier to imitate someone, when we discover that her moral exemplarity is not beyond our reach, since, in addition to an admirable trait, she also displays some ‘idiosyncrasies or eccentricities not quite in line with the picture of moral perfection’ (1982: 423). In contrast, when presenting novices with exemplars of moral sainthood, the educator will often have to deal with their discouragement and put great effort into helping them be attracted to the saint¹⁸, due to her distance from the moral imperfection of ordinary people¹⁹. Thus, it seems evident that the hero constitutes a more imitable kind of exemplar than the saint does.

Let us summarize what we have been arguing in this section by providing a concise comparison of the two models of moral exemplars according to the four criteria derived from PEBAME. First, we showed that saints are superior to heroes since, when faced with heroes, novices risk admiring their non-virtuous traits, whereas saints are admirable in all respects. Secondly, we argued that saints fare better than heroes with regard to virtuousness because the former, unlike the latter, are virtuous overall. However, heroes, due to their imperfection, enable the educator to point the novices to virtue by shedding light on the heroes’ vices. Despite the superiority of saints concerning the first two criteria, heroes too are fundamental for educating the novices in virtue by means of their advantageous position regarding transparency to virtue-detecting reflection and imitability. Indeed, the mere fact that heroes excel in a limited number of virtues makes it easier for novices to identify their exemplar traits and also makes it more likely that they will wish to imitate them²⁰.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have suggested that there are strong reasons for holding a pluralistic account of character education, grounded in a *prima facie* disunitarist perspective.

It might be objected that, since we have not provided any argument in support of disunitarism, if unitarists in moral theory turned out to be right, PEBAME would lose its bedrock. Indeed, it might be said, none of the hero's traits could be regarded as a virtue, and therefore none of them could be taken as the goal of a moral educational approach. Supposing that unitarists were right, we believe we would still have reasons to hold PEBAME. To support this claim, let us ask the following question: if the hero's traits were not real virtues, what else would they be? Surely, they would not be vices, since they tend to some good, and arise from morally worthy motivations. The only alternative seems to be that they would be mixed traits, i.e., imperfect or intermediate states of character. As Miller has it, a mixed trait is '...neither a virtue nor a vice, neither entirely good nor bad in every situation or context in which a person possesses it...' (Miller, 2013: 157). What is most important with mixed traits, then, is that they display two features: 1. as for their nature, they represent an intermediate step between virtue and vice; a step capable of being overcome, in order to acquire full virtue; 2. as for the subject they inhere in, they appear in individuals that are neither entirely virtuous, nor wholly vicious: and such are the subjects who need to undergo a process of character education.

Thus, it can be said that such traits are extremely relevant to character education, and that exemplary people endowed with them – such as the heroes would be, in a unitarist view – should be regarded as valuable for educational purposes. Indeed, they have the advantage of representing models closer to the novice's experience, and are capable of showing how the imperfections of character can be gradually overcome²¹.

Thus, even in case of a unitarist solution of the dispute over exemplars in moral theory, there would be no reason to dismiss our pluralistic and exemplarist account of character education (PEBAME), since we have demonstrated that moral sainthood and the imperfect exemplarity of people displaying mixed traits can effectively complement one another and serve together the purpose of educating the novice to full virtue.

¹ The theory conceives any moral concept or term as derivative from this non-conceptual foundation, as Zagzebski holds in the following quote: 'A virtue is a trait we admire in an admirable person. A right act (an act that a person would have most moral reason to do) in some set of circumstances C is what the admirable person would take to be most favored by the balance of reasons in circumstances C. A duty (an act it would be wrong not to do) in some set of circumstances C is what the admirable person would feel compelled to do in C in the sense that if he did not do it, he would feel guilty for not doing it. A good state of affairs (more precisely, that subset of states of affairs that can be the outcome of human acts) is a state of affairs at which admirable persons aim' (2010: 54-5).

² An exemplar-based account of character education shares some features with Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory: above all, its focus on the importance of role-modelling. See Bandura and Walters, 1963; and Bandura 1977.

³ See Murdoch, 1971: 89: 'We act rightly "when" the time comes' not out of strength of will but out of the quality of our usual attachments'.

⁴ This is what happens when, for instance, we figure out that the so-seeming exceptionally generous businessman who always gives huge amounts of money to the needy is actually money-laundering. The natural admiration we had towards him is something we are no longer willing to concede once we know about his deceit. The businessman case is actually an unlucky case, where the subject is deceived by a dishonest model, and it seems that the exemplarist can easily account for that. However, there might be situations where we just naturally admire the wrong person due to an internal failure of our natural emotion of admiration: for instance, we might admire people who like risking their own life merely for fun, or who bet impressive amounts of money on football games. It is in such cases that the role assigned to reflection by exemplarism proves essential.

⁵ While admiration is the fundamental moral emotion enabling one to detect the worthiness of a moral exemplar, emulation is the behavior one adopts to imitate her. Emulation is of the utmost

importance, since it allows one to become moral through the repetition of virtuous acts; it nevertheless must be practised cautiously, since it is always possible to direct it towards the wrong models, whose attractiveness is not due to their moral goodness but to other, non-moral, or even immoral, features.

⁶ See McGinn, 1992.

⁷ Badhwar's own position amounts to a Limited Unity of the Virtues view, in that she claims that the existence of a virtue in a particular domain of a person's life does not imply the existence of that (or any other) virtue in any other domain, but requires the absence of vice in most other domains (see 1996: 308).

⁸ On the importance of moral imagination, see Chappell, 2014; Lovibond, 2011; Murdoch, 1971, 1992; Nussbaum, 1983, 1985; Sherman, 1998.

⁹ Not even his wife believed him for a long time (see Deaglio, 2014).

¹⁰ Deaglio reports that Perlasca supported Fascism until the promulgation of racial laws, and that he disapproved of Mussolini's alliance with Hitler and the intervention of Italy in WWII (2014: 16-17).

¹¹ See Perlasca's diary in Deaglio (2014, ch. 6, 92-93). The same day, Perlasca received a letter of gratitude from a lawyer whom he had saved. The lawyer knew that Perlasca was not Spanish and that the appointment letter from the Spanish government was a fake. Thus, he wrote the letter of gratitude also to let him know that Soviets were in town and to give him some sort of proof that he helped the Jews despite his Fascist track record.

¹² Obviously, these remarks only serve the purpose of distinguishing between the notion of moral saint and that of moral hero. The authors of this paper have no intention to disregard or underestimate the moral value of Perlasca's deeds. The very fact that we thought of him as a perfect model for the moral hero should support this claim.

¹³ The source of most of this information is Yad Vashem website: <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/righteous-sportsmen/bartali.asp>; Section: The Game of Their Lives. The Stories of Righteous Among the Nations Who Devoted Their Lives to Sport.

¹⁴ Both episodes, as well as many others, are reported in the catalogue of the 2010 exhibition "Un diavolo di campione, un angelo di uomo. L'avventura umana di Gino Bartali", courtesy of the Polisportiva Gagliarda, San Benedetto del Tronto (AP).

¹⁵ There is always some bravery in volunteering that naive people might admire without wondering whether the reasons for such a decision make it morally good.

¹⁶ We accept Zagzebski's view according to which admiration, like any other human emotion, is an intentional state that can be directed to its adequate intentional objects as well as to inadequate ones. Thus, the mere fact that we admire someone does not entail that she is worthy of admiration (Zagzebski, 2003, *forthcoming*).

¹⁷ These considerations cast light on a further implication of our account, that is, the novice's opportunity to learn from contemplating vices in vicious people. This is no doubt the most challenging situation for the novice: on the one hand, the risk of admiring a wrong trait in the vicious model is high; on the other hand, she needs to make extensive use of her moral imagination to be able to learn from the various model's vices. Arguably, the support she needs on the educator's part increases as the degree of virtuousness decreases.

¹⁸ Some might object that this point contradicts our claim regarding the intrinsic admirability of exemplars. However, if we distinguish between being *admirable de jure* and being *admired de facto*, it becomes evident that this is not the case. Even if saints are, by definition, the most *admirable de jure* exemplars, it might be the case that they are not *admired de facto* by someone, and this is even more likely when considering the case of young people, whose ability to admire the right models is still in need of improvement.

¹⁹ We are well aware that there might be ways to counter such risk. Among the several possible strategies, the teacher may emphasize certain aspects of what the saint does and not others, not trying to encompass all of the saint's virtues all at once.

²⁰ It is important to point out here that a moral exemplar can be 'close' to us in various ways. In this paper, we are considering closeness from a psychological point of view, as the hero's possession of moral faults may persuade the novices that moral exemplarity is not out of reach. On the other hand, exemplars can be close to us in an experiential sense, as there may be 'ordinary' heroes and saints worth imitating among our relatives, friends, educators: the mere fact that their lives are unlikely to become famous should not prevent us from trying to follow their moral path. Furthermore, any exemplar-based account of moral education has to face the case of those young people who improperly admire some people close to them in the experiential sense. One typical

example might be that of the child who considers the criminal deeds of his father as morally exemplary and even tries to imitate his behavior. We have room here only for a brief remark on cases like this. Far from being accountable for such mistaken forms of admiration, exemplar-based accounts of education can afford the young with alternative models to admire and imitate, and can therefore be more effective than non-exemplar based ones, since presenting the young with alternative exemplars can afford the motivation that they would otherwise lack to revise their previous forms of admiration, insofar as the new exemplars elicit a desire for emulation.

²¹ Meira Levinson's important discussion of 'life-sized role models' in her recent work (2012) suggests a different way of taking seriously the issue of the exemplar's closeness to the novice's experience. In such work, she argues that the 'great men' often used in moral and especially civic education are less useful for inspiring novices to actually engage morally than are role models in the novice's neighbourhood, church, or family, who inspire by virtue of their 'very ordinariness', rather than of 'any overarching greatness of character, stature, or even impact' (154). We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to us.

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